

Paper Title: The Nature of the Supernatural: Possible Routes through the Conceptual Conundrums of the Natural/Supernatural Distinction

Author: D. Brian Austin

Institutional Affiliation: Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Philosophy, Carson-Newman College

This paper was prepared for "Science and Religion: Global Perspectives", June 4-8, 2005, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute ([www.metanexus.net](http://www.metanexus.net)).

Abstract:

Many of the most active debates in the Religion/Science field deal with the supernatural. From ID to naturalistic theism the words "nature" and "supernatural" are used repeatedly. Very often these terms are used in ambiguous or imprecise ways. Often they are used polemically, a usage that further erodes any philosophical substance that the words may have. There have been a few philosophical works that contribute to the clarification of the meaning of these key concepts, a notable example being Del Ratzsch's *Nature, Design and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001). This work does an excellent job of exposing our intuitions about what counts as "natural" (as well as "designed"). Ratzsch's monograph is valuable to the discussion of the natural/supernatural distinction primarily because it frames clearly the (nearly?) intractable difficulties of making sense of this distinction.

Part One of the paper will examine the difficulties of distinguishing nature from supernature, focusing on Ratzsch's notion of "counterflow." The paper will attempt to show that many of the debates about supposedly natural and supernatural causation reduce to a question about the origins of intelligence—a question whose full answer will require, of course, an understanding of the nature of intelligence itself. Prospects of solving this problem, as posed, are not bright.

Part Two of the paper focuses on American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who inspired Southern U. S. novelist Walker Percy to begin to think in new ways about the way in which human intelligence transcends normal avenues of cause and effect. Peirce's notion that logic boils down to "signs" and their relations suggested to Percy and to many others a potentially very profitable way to approach questions of intelligence and free will, those human qualities that suggest a human transcendence over the "natural" world. Percy's heavily Peirce-influenced essay collection, *The Message in a Bottle* (NY: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1975), offers a vision of how human experience transcends "laws of nature." If this kind of semiotic transcendence is the prime analogy for talk of other kinds of transcendence (the "supernatural") then new dialogue directions may be opened.

Part Three of the paper consists of a preliminary exploration of ways in which Peirce's statistical reading of experience and his notion of the "transcendent" sign can help to reframe claims and questions about the "supernatural" in ways that do not suffer the conceptual difficulties described above. The paper will argue that while this reframing will not solve these problems (which may, in the end, turn out to be mysteries), it may

serve to elevate affected parts of the Religion/Science dialogue into regions of more light, less heat, and promising new directions.

#### Biography:

D. Brian Austin is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, TN. He has presented and published in the Religion/Science field since 1989, when he completed his dissertation under the tutelage of Dr. Eric Rust and Dr. Richard Cunningham at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He won a Templeton Foundation Religion/Science course award in 1998 and published *The End of Certainty and the Beginning of Faith* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing) in 2000. He has also published religion/science works in *Great Thinkers of the Western World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) and *Facets of Faith and Science* (UPA, 1996).

#### Paper Text

### INTRODUCTION: IS NATURE NATURAL? THREE ANECDOTES WHOSE SENSE, IT IS HOPED, WILL BECOME CLEAR IN THE SEQUEL

The bag holding the sliced bread proudly proclaims “All Natural Ingredients,” or “no artificial ingredients.” Early on this bothered me. So I began to examine the ingredients label on other products to see if there was a difference between those that made this apparently crucial claim and those that did not. As I suspected, the line of demarcation was quite fuzzy. Apparently, according to one manufacturer in my very unscientific study, “Yellow #5” is a natural product. To another, monosodium glutamate fits the bill. One rationale that might be used to justify this classification would point out that not a single component element of Yellow #5 comes from beyond the periodic table. Even Styrofoam cups contain nothing from outside “nature.” All natural ingredients!

Little did I know that just beneath the surface of these juvenile musings lay a persistent terminological conundrum. That conundrum is the impetus for this paper.

The first job that I really loved was as an astronomy lab instructor during college. Along with the wonder of physics and the cosmos, I had the privilege of taking small groups of young ladies into separate rooms for experiments (one of these is where I met my wife). In one experiment we attempted to measure the acceleration of gravity. This experiment began in me a frustration and curiosity that have persisted. I led students in performing the “tuning fork/wax paper” version of the gravity experiment hundreds of time over four years, and the blasted thing never turned out the same way twice! Each group would, in good scientific fashion, repeat the procedure five or six times and then determine an average value, and report this as their finding. Part of the lab report required a recounting of the trials, and a suggestion about the possible reasons behind the variant results. Friction, air resistance, human imprecision in calibrating and utilizing the timekeeping devices, etc., appeared on practically every report. We presumed that the received acceleration value of 9.8 meters per second per second was absolute, and that our very rudimentary efforts were just beginning to zero in on it. Never was a thought given to the possibility that maybe the accepted value was not completely settled. The use of statistics was obviously only a concession to our inability to unmask exactly the

inexorable mathematical necessity of the clockwork universe. Only later did it make us wonder if there are in fact “laws of nature” that may or may not be violated.

Once I was traveling the highways through the farmland of Tennessee with a Nigerian friend who, up to that point, had never traversed these bucolic rolling hills. As we passed a very common (to me) sight, he became visibly nonplused. While staring with strained neck at the grazing cows he asked me in slow, measured tones, “Are those sheep, or goats?” Unable to think of anything wittier to say at the time, I responded, “Neither, they are cows.” “Cows,” he said, in a tone and face of sheer delight. He was amused and very pleased at the creation of a new kind of name, as if morning had broken like the first morning.

#### DEFINING “NATURE” AND “NATURALISM”

One of the lasting impressions that one may gain from reading a book such as William Dembski’s *Intelligent Design* or Michael Behe’s *Darwin’s Black Box* is the failure of these authors, who are writing philosophy, after all, to define key terms. Among the terms that remains undefined by both of these champions of intelligent design is “intelligence.” They also argue that mainstream science is to be faulted for ruling out of hand the possibility of supernatural explanations. But neither of them offers a meaningful definition of “supernatural.”

Similarly, but not surprisingly, vigorous opponents of supernaturalism insist with the late Carl Sagan that “the universe is all that there is,” but they, too, normally fail to offer their readers a clear account of the distinction between natural and supernatural. So persons like Richard Dawkins and William Provine and E. O. Wilson share the debate stage with the likes of Dembski and Behe and Philip Johnson at venues like “Darwin Days” and Campus Crusade for Christ meetings. They make for sensational debates because the opponents share the same language of a foggy dualism. One side is for it and the other is against it, both assuming, but not arguing, that the distinction between natural and supernatural is substantive.

But the problem of speaking clearly about the meaning of “natural” and “supernatural” is not confined to popular literature and discourse. The difficulty goes deep enough that even very talented philosophers have admitted and illustrated the obstinate character of this issue. To define “supernatural,” one must define “natural.” To define “supernaturalism,” one must define “naturalism.” It turns out that defining “natural” is a lot like defining “good,” or “yellow” (G. E. Moore’s indefinable analogs).

#### *Toward a Non-circular Definition*

The science/religion journal *Zygon* has made some positive contributions toward a remedy in its 2003 volume. The series on religious naturalism in that year helped at least to clarify the issues. It also allowed the definitional problems to surface yet again. For example, Gordon Kaufmann describes his own view of naturalism as follows:

“ . . . so far as I can see all human (and other) life is to be found within what we call nature, and the whole of human meaning and value, personality and spirituality, has emerged within the complex natural processes of life on Earth and is not induced from outside the natural order from some supernatural world or by some extra-natural person-agent.” (96). So in attempting to describe what his own version of naturalism is, he uses the term “natural” (or its variants) no less than five times. This phenomenon is not

unusual in the literature. Almost every attempt falls prey to this sort of circularity. And this should not surprise us, given the lengthy history and breadth of usage of this term. There are other notable examples.

In his very fine book on religious naturalism, Willem Drees defines “ontological naturalism” (one of several components of his naturalist worldview): “The natural world is the whole of reality that we know of and interact with; no supernatural or spiritual realm distinct from the natural world shows up *within* our natural world, not even in the mental life of humans” (18). Here “ontological naturalism” is defined using four instances of “nature” and its variants.

Famous naturalist philosopher Kai Nielsen offers an understanding of naturalism in his recent Prometheus lectures: “Naturalism denies that there are supernatural or spiritual realities. There are, naturalists claim, no purely mental substances and there are no supernatural realities beyond nature or transcendent to the world” (25). Down to three instances of “nature” now.

Continuing the trend, philosopher Sterling Lamprecht gets closer to a non-circular definition of “nature” and “naturalism.” He also plainly states the difficulty of definition in this case. After noting that many obstacles face one who would define any “ism,” and remarking that “naturalism” may be among the toughest to tie down, having “no standard meaning” (201), he offers this definition: “Naturalism is the metaphysical theory which maintains that everything that exists comes into being, endures for a time, and then passes away, because of the interaction of things and forces of the natural world” (p. 202). Only one use of “natural” in this passage.

Lamprecht is clearly moving in the direction of a non-circular definition such as that offered by D. Armstrong (as cited by Mark Bedau in Wagner and Warner, *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*), who says that naturalism is “an intellectual movement guided by the principle that everything real is at least in principle within the scope of a purely scientific description of the world” (23). This is a most helpful move (one echoed in other writers as well), since the varieties of naturalism that spark the current debate with supernaturalism are the offspring of 400 years or so of scientific inquiry. As we will see more clearly below, science relies on regularity explanations. Naturalism is the belief, then, that all things will eventually fall under the scope of some set of regularity explanations. Bishop Butler was privy to this insight, as was Charles Darwin, who used Butler’s words as an epigram to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Origin of Species*. The first part of that quotation reads: “The only distinct meaning of the word ‘natural’ is *stated, fixed* or *settled . . .*” To this notion of the natural as the regular we shall return later. This simple idea will prove most helpful.

### *Del Ratzsch and “Counterflow”*

At least one good book has made progress in the attempt to shine a light through the heavy terminological fog that engulfs debates about the natural and supernatural. Philosopher of science Del Ratzsch, of Calvin College, has made this effort in his fine book *Nature, Design, and Science*. He correctly identifies the problem by noting “Surprisingly, virtually none of the foundational work essential to exploration (pro or con) of key issues has been done” (ix).

Ratzsch effectively identifies the core intuition of designedness (in a context that is clearly focused on supernatural design) in an early quote: “So we typically recognize

artificiality—and get our first clues to designedness—through recognizing indications of counterflow in results, processes, or initial conditions, and we recognize such counterflow against the background of and in contrast with our understanding of the normal flows of nature. That is essentially our method whether applied to watches, TVs, houses, marbles, stands of pine trees growing in evenly spaced rows, shocks of wheat tied up with strands of twisted straw—or signals from outer space” (Ratzsch 2001, p. 9).

Then he moves from artificiality more specifically toward the concept of design. “So design is to be understood in terms of deliberate agent activity intentionally aimed at generating particular patterns. Pattern, in turn, is to be understood in terms of structures that have special affinities to cognition—which correlate to mind. The agent activity involved produces artifacts that are defined via counterflow and that frequently exhibit familiar primary marks of agent activity and counterflow by which that activity and artificiality can be identified” (15-16).

Because Ratzsch’s offers such a solid treatment of these foundational issues that speaks to our current debates about design and nature, and because I think he is essentially correct in identifying the core intuitions that underlie our use of terms like “design,” “pattern,” “natural,” and “supernatural,” this paper will take look at his project and explore the prospects of his aim of clarifying our discourse in these areas. Can we succeed in using terms like these, especially “natural” and “supernatural,” with sufficient clarity to ground a useful dialogue? Probably not, for a number of reasons, two of which can be treated here.

**Problem One: Identifying “Counterflow.”** Central to Ratzsch’s discussion of intelligence and supernatural design is the notion of “counterflow.” Counterflow is a characteristic of objects, events, or systems that have been brought about by intelligent agents. If we see, to cite one of his examples, a large Titanium cube on the surface of Mars, we would not hesitate to conclude that its existence and presence there was the result of some intelligent beings. Why do we know this? Because this cube is not something nature would normally do if left on her own (4-6). The existence of the cube, or the VCR, or the evenly spaced rows of trees is a pointer to agent causality because it is not what nature would do normally. Paley’s watch found on the heath is the most famous philosophical example of counterflow. Paley observed that it would be obvious to anyone that this watch did not occur due to the normal flow of nature.

Though I think Ratzsch’s notion of counterflow accurately portrays the chief intuition behind inferences to designedness, I also think that it will be unable to do the work he sets for it—to clarify the dialogue about nature and design. But it may do a great service yet, if it helps to expose the deep difficulties in defining “natural,” and the concomitant problems with defining “supernatural.” The main difficulty in the concept of counterflow is our inability to pin down “what nature will normally do.” In order for us to recognize counterflow, we must first have a good idea of normal flow. And we simply don’t know nearly enough about that, at least not yet.

Presumably the Grand Canyon would not qualify as counterflow, and thus would not be understood as designed. This is because nature does normally have water running *downhill* and carving its way through rocks over millions of years. On the other hand, the canyon would not be there except that the water began to flow in a certain contingent direction a long time ago. If the water had left the rock alone, then the canyon would not be there. What does it mean for nature to be left alone?

But what about the biota that feed on that water from the Colorado River? Are they natural? Think of the ants that feed on the leaves that grow near the river. Their colonies are pretty remarkable, but are they counterflow? Are they designed? Would an ant colony be something that nature would do if left on her own? As we look down on that pretty remarkable piece of organization, the teamwork, the division of labor, we might be pretty impressed, but since ants are everywhere, always making colonies, we would not usually think of their work as counter to the normal flow of nature. On the other hand, the dirt would just be dirt if not for the ants. Their activity has transformed the dirt into a highly organized working and dwelling place.

Or switch continents and imagine coming upon remnants of African chimpanzee activity. You might easily find a stick that had been stripped of its leaves in order to make it more suitable as a tool for extracting termites from a tree trunk at lunchtime. Is that stick, which has been altered by the tool-making ape with planning and purpose, an example of counterflow? Is that stick something that nature would not have done if left on its own? Is a chimpanzee natural? Since these sticks and perhaps other kinds of tools are common features of the lives of some chimpanzees, we might call them natural. On the other hand, the existence of a constructed tool, intentionally prepared ahead of time for a specific purpose, might qualify as counterflow. Nature, in the absence of this hungry and resourceful primate, would have no such stick.

Now imagine alien anthropologists looking down on *Homo sapiens* (maybe the same aliens that put the titanium cube on Mars) and asking questions like those that we put to canyons, ants, and apes. Instead of finding termite sticks and burrowed out ant colonies, they would happen upon Styrofoam cups and high-rise apartment buildings. In fact they would find cups and apartments by the millions, very regular means for the human species to feed and house itself. All of this could be seen as very much within in the normal flow of nature. On the other hand, if humans had not intervened in certain ways, then nature on her own would never have created Styrofoam or high-rises. And if the galaxy turns out to be littered with titanium cubes, then these might be considered natural as well, or not.

Each of these examples might involve counterflow, or maybe none of them does. And the same can be said about any object or system in the universe, or indeed the universe itself. So it seems that we will never, short of seeing the whole universe *sub specie aeternitatis*, have a way of definitively discerning counterflow, because we have no way of telling just what sorts of bizarre things nature might be able to do. To call an event or structure “something that nature would not have done on her own” requires seeing both sides of a boundary. We cannot claim to *see* both sides, or even to assert confidently that there are two sides. In the spirit of Kant and Wittgenstein, we cannot *know* the limits of knowledge, *say* the limits of language, or assume a perspective outside of nature that will allow us to determine just where, or even if, it ends. And if we cannot draw at least a relatively clear boundary around *nature*, then we cannot claim to have a clear understanding of the term *supernatural*.

What we do see in the cases of ants, apes, and humans is a relatively more complex (dare I say “advanced”?) entity leaving marks that a less complex entity does not. The river does not carve an ant colony, the ant does not make tools for individual future use, the ape does not manufacture Styrofoam, and humans cannot construct spacecraft that will accomplish manned interstellar travel. So it can be argued that we do

see a progression, and that we have no way of knowing just where we stand in that progression. So what are the ultimate origins of the complexity that we see in different degrees in our world? Is this order evidence of a designing mind? Or is what we call mind one result of the processes of a complexifying world? It seems that this age-old question is the inevitable result of speculation like that above about the order in our world. And since we can't even come up with a clear picture of "natural," the backdrop against which "supernatural" would be defined, explanations of order that rely on the concept of supernatural are very vulnerable. Explanations of order that boldly *insist* on supernatural explanations are, of course, even weaker. So perhaps the fact that we have not made a lot of progress in answering this question in the last 3000 years suggests that we might benefit from framing the question differently, more humbly, more suited to our deeply limited perspective.

**Problem Two: The Analogy of Agent Activity.** Related to the central problem sketched above is the problem of using human agent activity as an analogy for explaining other features of the universe. Design arguments universally rely, at least in part, on analogy to human design (though Ratzsch does argue that Paley's core argument should not be read as an analogical argument). One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the presence of counterflow, according to Ratzsch, is agent activity, which is to be distinguished from "natural" activity. Styrofoam cups are clearly the result of agents. I fail to see how this assertion says anything more than that these cups are the result of some human-like process. And when proponents of intelligent design, for example, argue that supernatural intelligent agency must be invoked to account for eyeballs or bacterial flagella, they are saying the same thing. Attempts to be any more specific than that are bound to founder. The entire idea of "agency" is deeply problematic, having exercised some of the best philosophic minds in history, yet leading to nothing resembling consensus.

Explanatory analogies should seek to shed light on the lesser known by appeal to the better known. So we explain the physical concept of field by referring to the motion of a field of grain in the Kansas wind. We explain atomic structure by referring to familiar pictures of the solar system. These analogies have been helpful, even though severely limited, because the *explanans* is the relatively better understood phenomenon. To explain the bacterial flagellum by analogy to human agency in the construction of locomotion devices is not nearly as helpful because human agency (and the related notions of mind, freedom, consciousness) is one the most poorly understood phenomena that we have faced. Not that there is not value in exploring the potential analogy; there is. We should explore the deep affinities between our thinking and nature's (other) processes, but we are nowhere near providing an explanation of order by invoking an analogy to human intelligent agency.

## TWO PEIRCEAN NOTIONS THAT MAY HELP

**Regularities Instead of Laws.** In the spirit of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, I'd like to suggest another way of approaching these truly fascinating questions. Rather than using dualistic language to either affirm or deny the existence of some "realm beyond nature," maybe we should rather conceive of our experience on a continuum of explicability. We could still, for the sake of simplicity, begin with two

categories: those objects, events, or systems which we can explain; and those which we cannot. Conceivable as an extension of Bishop Butler's understanding of "nature" cited above, a thing is "explained" if it fits into some regularity scheme in a fashion with which we are pleased. A thing is unexplained if it fails to fit into our regularity frameworks, and thus causes us what Peirce calls the "irritation of doubt." When we encounter something that does not fit into our regularity explanations, then we are driven either to make it fit or to revise our frameworks. This is how we learn about our universe. A mountain-sized titanium cube on Mars would not fit our current frameworks. So we seek to enlarge our frameworks to account for it. And our seeking ceases when the irritation settles into belief.

Important for a Peircean reading of explanation is the endlessness of the process. Nothing is ever fully explained, because there are always more levels of regularities that might be uncovered. Only in the infinite future will all things have happened so that all things might then be explained. "Explicability has no determinate and absolute limit, everything being explicable everything has been brought about" (*The Essential Peirce*, 219). So we would seek the explanation of the cube, then explanations of the aliens who put it there, and ultimately of the origins of the ordered cosmos itself. In the limit of the infinite future, explanations are reached, regularities are crystallized into law, and the quest is consummated as all the irritations of doubt are quieted.<sup>f</sup>

An important part of this universal drive toward regularity, toward cosmos, for Peirce, is his contention that paramount among the things that cry out for explanation is the existence of law itself. We tend to count things "explained" when we name the law that accounts for the relevant aspects of the *explanandum*. Peirce insists that we go further, and seek an explanation for the *law itself*, for lawfulness in general. Peirce's candidate for the explanation of laws, which I mention here because it is a potential unifying principle that avoids the above-mentioned pitfalls of dualism, is "habit-taking." For Peirce, the universe exhibits habit-taking at all levels. As it grows, the habits become more regular. But they are not completely regular yet. Hence what we call "laws" of nature are better understood as growing statistical regularities. In an insight prescient of quantum mechanics Peirce asserts that "There is room for serious doubt whether the fundamental laws of mechanics hold good for single atoms . . ." (CP 6.11). And that "I suppose that on excessively rare, sporadic occasions a law of nature is violated in some infinitesimal degree" (*The Essential Peirce*, 218). He later modified that view to hold that serious violations of regularities happen very rarely and that minor violations, too small normally be noticed, happen all the time. But there is a sense in which these anomalies are not really violations, and that is because they submit to an explanation of sorts. They do fit into a Gaussian distribution. The bell curve is a kind of explanation of the improbable, at a very general level.

This is relevant to our discussion of natural and supernatural because Peirce's notions here, if legitimate, give us yet further reasons to question whether we will ever make sense of a distinction between "natural" and "supernatural." As quantum mechanics has confirmed to the satisfaction of most interpreters, the "laws" of nature are in fact fundamentally statistical, and hence cannot strictly be "broken." It violates no law of nature for a watch to be spontaneously generated on the heath. It is prohibitively unlikely, which gives us good reason to explain it as the result of the actions of some intermediary entity, but it is not impossible that it be formed otherwise.



According to standard design intuitions, and as parsed by Ratzsch, all agent activity introduces a discontinuity into the normal flow of nature. One sign of supernatural agency, though in no way required of supernatural agency, is that it can introduce an anti-nomic discontinuity—it can break the laws of nature. Indeed this understanding of the supernatural is as old as humanity itself. Laws of nature are broken in ways that affect human ends and aims, hence there must be influence from some realm beyond. Now if garden-variety human agent counterflow is hard to pin down, then supernaturally introduced counterflow is in serious conceptual trouble. It seems that finite intelligent agency is held by the design people to disrupt the flow of nature. Supernatural intelligent agency apparently differs in that it can *really* disrupt the normal flow of nature, even to the point of suspending its laws.

I think the statistical understanding of natural regularities causes the resurrected design argument additional trouble at this point, because there is no such thing as breaking a law of nature. Some beings have the ability to introduce peculiar, even profound discontinuities into the histories of other things. As stated above, complex entities can do things with matter and energy that leave marks which differ in degree from the kinds of marks left by less complicated things. And it is very likely that they do so precisely by exploiting the less-than-complete-lawfulness of the universe, a type of exploitation apparently very accessible to self-referential systems (from autocatalytic chemical reactions to deeply recursive organisms like human beings). Humans are especially adept at magnifying the microscopic movement of energy and chemical into noticeable results. The overall aims of the organism somehow fold back upon the lower level subsystems to produce symphonies and paintings and love and hate. I have a hunch that this is part of an explanation of how “reasons can be causes” (a recurring phrase of Donald Davidson).

Now if there are systems that can take minute variabilities in nature’s regularities at crucial causal junctures and magnify them into canyons, earthquakes, or tornadoes, then this further weakens any inference to the supernatural in the dualistic sense. Extremely unusual events can and do happen in a world like this. This recursive world is deeply unpredictable and interesting, maybe even to the point of being “enchanted.” I use that loaded word quite intentionally, because the kind of Peirce-inspired world picture that I paint is not going to be very palatable to today’s committed naturalist, who, as described by Michael Ruse, “is the person who is an atheist, who does deny that there is anything beyond blind law working on inert matter (99).” A Peircean world-picture can easily affirm the reality of general class names, of regularities and patterns that are every bit as real as their component parts, of spirit, of God. Peirce cannot unambiguously be invoked as an advocate for this whole list, but there can be a solid metaphysic built in this way, preserving even key religious values, without the need for some indefinable split between natural and supernatural. There is no reason to confine this universe to “blind, inert matter.” Such value judgments are every bit as presumptuous as those that jump quickly to blame a magical God for every unexplained event.

There is considerable debate about Peirce’s own private religious views, so let me suggest a possible Peircean way of undoing the nature/supernature tangle that should work for the theist, even if Peirce himself is not counted among theists. Remembering Bishop Butler’s notion that there is nothing in the word “nature” except the ideas of “fixed” and “settled,” what would it mean for the theist to continue to understand more

and more about reality? In the infinite limit, when we see face to face, will we understand something more of God? If we do, then that means we will understand the *nature* of God, those things that are fixed and settled as part of the being of God. So all things will then be *natural* to us, for they all will be seen to flow from the *nature* of God. As one who agrees with Peirce, I don't think we will ever actually arrive at such a place, but it is good to conceive of the limit, that goal toward which we strive. Only the most monumental arrogance would suggest that the wonder of the unknown could ever be exhausted by minds like ours.

**“Thirdness” and Semiotic Transcendence.** For the final, brief section of the paper I'd like to take this exploration in a significantly different direction. It may prove to be a fruitless detour, but for now it seems to be potentially fertile soil in which to nurture future insights into the nature/supernature problem.

Wagner and Warner, in the introduction to their fine collection of essays *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*, note that many arguments against naturalism begin with and draw continually upon the popular belief that human consciousness (understood in its role as representing objects external to the mind) cannot be explained by natural means. In suggesting the relatively meager prospects for those pursuing this line of argument, they pose this challenge. “What makes a representation (as opposed to, say, distance) nonnatural? One would need to show how some feature of this relation distinguishes it from those discussed in science” (13). Though these authors do not pursue the Peircean directions of this question, for persons who know something of Peirce, such a pursuit is almost demanded. Peirce's ideas of sign-relations (semiosis), especially as interpreted and illustrated by novelist Walker Percy (a huge fan of Peirce's theories of language), very directly suggest a response to Wagner and Warner's challenge. And they also suggest a kind of “transcendence” whose philosophical exploration would further expose the likely impossibility of ever drawing any clear boundaries around the “natural.”

Percy's collection of essays, *The Message in the Bottle*, repeatedly illustrates his understanding of Peirce's theory of signs by referring to the breakthrough in the life of Helen Keller when the deaf and blind youngster finally discovered what it was to name something. When she discovered that this “thing” washing over one hand was “water” (as spelled out into her other hand by Annie Sullivan), a whole world burst open in front of her and her life changed forever. As Percy reports “. . . once she knew what water ‘was,’ she had to know what everything else ‘was’” (203). Percy draws myriad conclusions from this experience (referring to its implications for everything from existentialism to psychotherapy), but one of those is of interest here.

For Charles Peirce our naming of things illustrated our character as sign-using beings. A name is a kind of sign. And signs have an irreducibly triadic structure. In Peirce's oft-cited words: “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object” (CP 2.228). Obviously this is not the place for a thorough exposition of Peirce's semiotics, but the relevant point here is that the creation of signs involves something more than mere 1) cause and 2) effect; it requires a third.

If science is understood as the explanation of phenomena by reference to strict laws of cause and effect, or “blind law working on inert matter,” then it describes only dyadic relationships, necessary connections between cause and effect. Sign-making, to the contrary, cannot be described in any dyadic way. In other words, there is no necessity (dyadic relation) that can ever be identified in the naming of things. The water contacting the hand may certainly be described in terms of cause and effect (dyadically), but the naming of the “thing” does not submit to this analysis. The sign-making mind in a sense rises above the dyadic world, the world of “secondness,” as it makes connections, draws generalizations aimed at future potential experiences (which, of course, have not happened yet and thus are not the object of any necessary experience). This mind manifests rather “thirdness,” the realm of symbol, expectation, concept. In Peirce’s words: “It is important to understand what I mean by semiosis. All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects . . . or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs. But by "semiosis" I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs” (CP 5.484).

The “rising above” is the kind of transcendence that we experience at the heart of who we are. Naming things unites cause and effect, subject and object, chance and law, possibility and necessity. The thirdness of sign-life has been noted in one way or another by thinkers at least since Plato. It ties to the transcendental mysteries of the *Vernunft* for Kant and unites opposites at the core of the Godhead for Schelling. It became central to the freedom of *Dasein* for Heidegger. For Percy, as with Heidegger, naming founds Being.

What might this have to do with our persistent reaching for the beyond, sometimes called “supernatural?” Maybe something like this. Because we both transcend dyadic relations *and* are subject to dyadic relations, we suppose that there must be some perspective that would found our being, that could name us and imbue existence to us in the way that water becomes real when Helen Keller names it. We conclude that there must be a realm that transcends us (us *qua* secondness) analogous to our occupation of the realm that transcends “natural” secondness. The “naturalist”—“supernaturalist” debates are only about secondness. The materialists and fundamentalists are speaking of secondness. Our thirdness is not lawfulness. Beyond lawfulness lies that which we may be tempted to call “supernatural.” We confer a kind of being on things by naming them. But we, too, are named. But we cannot be pinned down by the naming. Our thirdness always takes us somewhere beyond the named. We conclude that there must be a kind of semiotic transcendence that could account for the being conferred upon us. Of course, whatever this may be, it must remain always a mystery to thing named.

Yet we will always seek the next “higher” level which we might occupy in order to have a full(er) account of where we are now. But, of course, once we see things from that new level (face to face?), we wonder anew about where we are and seek another step beyond. Thus our kind of consciousness is characterized by a kind of endlessness—it is bottomless as we dig and without zenith as we ascend. Analogous to Cantor’s nested infinities, there will always be more, as long as we are the kind of consciousnesses we are. We will always look higher and deeper for things to name. The Hebrews knew

enough not to utter the divine name. The creators of the book of *Exodus* knew that the divine name was not really a name at all.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Whether we refer to these mysteries of the yet-to-be-named that dwell in the undiscovered countries—these entities, patterns, agents only imperfectly revealed to our particular filters—as “supernatural” matters little in the end. Debates that demand the natural/supernatural dichotomy are really distractions, albeit often very considerable ones. The real question is whether we will allow this detour to curtail our quest for new instances of spirit, pattern, relation, connection. Michael Ruse concludes his recent book with an affirmation of Hamlet’s conviction that “there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” This is true even if heaven is *in* earth and earth *in* heaven. The real question before the committed seekers of our age is not whether or not there exists some magical supernatural realm populated by category-mistake-daimonia, but whether we will allow Hamlet’s “things” and our pursuit of them to bring us wonder, life, and hope. Or will the materialist insistence on “blind, inert” matter at the core of existence conquer hope with its pervasive disenchantment? Or will supernaturalist refuge in the divine whim—that “science-stopping” puff of smoke—persuade us of the futility of delving further? It is my hope that the distractions of misdirected dialogue will not squeeze the life and vision out of us. It is my hope that we will take heart with Kentucky poet Wendell Berry in his epigrammatic celebration of another line from Shakespeare, “Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again.”

#### WORKS CITED

- Berry, Wendell. *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000.
- Drees, Willem. *Religion, Science, and Naturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Hartshorne, Charles and Paul Weiss, eds. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935.
- Kaufman, Gordon D. “Biohistorical Naturalism and the Symbol ‘God.’” *Zygon* 38 no.1, March 2003.
- Kloesel, Christian and Nathan Houser, eds. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1867-1893*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Lamprecht, Sterling. *The Metaphysics of Naturalism*. NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967.
- Nielsen, Kai. *Naturalism Without Foundations*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996.

Percy, Walker. *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

Ratzsch, Del. *Nature, Design and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Ruse, Michael. *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Wagner, Steven J. and Richard Warner. *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1993